

Glimpses of Groomsport over a lifetime

Everything seems so large to him. The shed, which serves as Groomsport's village shop, is painted "battleship grey" - a common post-war colour. It is the spring of 1948 and they are on a short holiday. The 3 year old boy is standing unsteadily just inside the shed and slides his head round the doorpost, searching for a small group of people approaching up the street. The sun glints off his blond uncut curls as he studies the object of his search. His mother is approaching purposefully, cradling his younger sister in her bronzed muscular arms. Grandmother struggles to keep up, forcing the pace of the group to slow somewhat. Unskilled as yet in reading body language, he nevertheless gets the impression of impending doom. His little tongue is coated in ice cream and he quickly takes another lick at the cone in his hand.

A few minutes earlier, he had broken away from the group and raced along the street. He had dashed into the shed and ordered, with the few syllables and gestures at his disposal, the largest, most exotic ice-cream that his experience of life to date could conceive of. The vendor, ever so pleased that the season was showing such potential for profit, supplied the confection with alacrity. Bad mistake!

She is standing over him now and looking down. He tries his favourite diversionary tactic and makes little leaps into the air, springing from both feet, just as he has seen the new-born lambs do in the field behind his home. It is not working! He stumbles backwards a couple of feet, just out of range of the 'clip round the ear' that he anticipates may be coming his way. His mother is not in the mood to be meddled with, so he tries to blend into the background. He is relieved when mother turns her attention to the shopkeeper, berating him fiercely. The boy takes another lick and observes the man inwardly wilting under her attack, even though he is making a passable outward show of bravado.

In essence, the conversation, taking on a rather staccato pace, alternates between attack and defence, with the shopkeeper parrying the polite acerbic tongue-lashing of the thrusting maternal accusations. The gist of the dialogue involves the rights of the seller to provide goods, versus factors associated with the age of responsibility of the purchaser. After a few sentences, a compromise is struck, with the shopkeeper agreeing never to service requests from this child again and mother storming out mollified somewhat by a substantial discount on the cost of the ice-cream. He follows her out very quietly, sneaking another furtive lick at the spoils. The cone tastes even better now. Mother seems to have calmed down somewhat, so she might forget about this affair and he might avoid punishment.

He feels the warm glow of a small victory.

The water in the harbour is transparent and still. The sandy bottom is clearly visible between his feet, as they dangle aimlessly from the harbour wall. It is late afternoon. There is no-one around and even the boats moored in the harbour are barely moving at all. A green line of cord dangles over his knee and dips passively into the water just below his left foot. It doesn't seem to be properly connected to the hook. It looks as if the little ripples on the water surface are breaking and joining the cord alternately as they pass by. Just one of life's little mysteries, he muses, lifting his gaze and surveying the cottages on the opposite side of the deserted harbour. He is bored. Looking to the right, his attention is attracted by the raucous racket made by the Arctic Terns on Cockle Island, fighting to establish living space amongst their neighbours. He thinks about how fatal it would be to fall into such deep water and he determines not to do so.

The day had started off with such promise and excitement. His father was repairing Groomsport Presbyterian Church. He had brought the eight year old boy with him, with the promise of fishing from the harbour, playing on the sand and other exotic activities. What an adventure lay ahead. They sped over from Newtownards after breakfast, to start work at 8 o'clock. He had never fished before and it promised to be such fun. The village shops weren't open so he amused himself watching the men preparing to start work on the church. Every so often he would race off expectantly to the shops. They remained firmly closed! Back he trudged wearily to the Church. He found this waiting game to be very tiring indeed. "Perhaps this is the village closing day", he thought. Eventually, after many return trips and almost exhausted by nervous excitement, he gained retail access, a few minutes after 9am.

Unfortunately, that did not, in itself, simplify life. He realised that he didn't know exactly what he needed, so he stood in the middle of the shop looking up at the shelves. A heavy disappointment began to descend. His gaze ranged from the top shelf, with its dusty brown paper bags and jars, to the counter, heavily laden with scales and till, sitting as it were, primed and ready for the first purchase of the day. He had vague ideas in his head involving fishing rods, spades and buckets but he had really never seen a fishing rod. He began to realise that its purchase could be tricky.

There is only so long that a small boy can stand in the middle of a grocery store before he is accosted accusingly by the man behind the counter. It transpires that this shop only stocks groceries and he is directed to the grey shed further along the street.

So it was that he emerged into the morning sunlight, grasping a small wooden frame with perhaps 10 yards of green string wrapped round it. He examined the contraption carefully, now that he had possession of it. There was a sharp hook at the end and tied near it, like an oversize Polo mint, was a piece of lead. The shopkeeper, skilfully avoiding any absolute guarantees, had indicated that it was not impossible to catch a fish in the harbour with this tackle. So he hastened to the harbour, trying to figure out how this apparatus would work, optimistically hoping for insight with every step.

He decided to 'bait' the hook with the crust of a sandwich, originally intended to be his lunch. His first attempts had involved the white parts of the bread but they fell off the hook as soon as they touched the water. The crust took a while longer to soften but it too eventually fell off. High tide was not until 3pm that day so the harbour was almost dry when he first got there. He wandered about the beach and rock pools for what seemed many hours, waiting for the water level to rise. He hoped that deeper water would encourage fish to swim into the harbour and find his crust. He hadn't worked out yet what would happen next but he did have a mental picture, of him carrying a large fish wrapped in newspaper home to mother and being welcomed with open arms!

After a day spent wandering around the harbour, examining the boats; looking into every rock-pool he could find; descending the slippery harbour steps to the rising water level; trudging up to the church to find out progress there and back down to the harbour to check the water level again. So the day passed in unproductive monotony.

The tide did rise in the harbour, until it was dangerously deep but still no fish appeared and the line dangling over his leg never did twitch in response to a "bite". He very carefully moved away from the harbour edge, wrapped the green line around the wooden frame and took it home that evening. "Fishing is difficult - only for the highly skilled and is incredibly boring" he mused.

It was a tricky manoeuvre for a learner driver to achieve the correct permutation of clutch, handbrake and accelerator to move off from the stop line at the hilltop on Harbour Road. He glanced in the rear view mirror. There it lay glistening, white and menacing on the slipway – a silvery-white speedboat. He shuddered inwardly.

Each Sunday his practice drive brought him over from Newtownards in the van with Father and Sister, through Bangor before stopping for a walk round Groomsport harbour.

On this particular afternoon he had been fascinated to see a man launch his new fibreglass speedboat into the harbour. He proudly placed his young son onto the seat behind him and tentatively edged out of the harbour into the Lough. They continued so for some minutes, leaving a gentle foamy trail of small bubbles, straight as a die, in their wake. The boat was docile, responding obediently as they turned parallel to the shore towards Bangor for a mile or so; then back again towards Briggs Rocks - the boat seeming to almost gobble up its own wake as they went back and forth, from one side of the bay to the other.

The warm South-Westerly breeze tossed the girls' hair seductively as they promenaded along the harbour wall. His attention was thus diverted for some minutes as he surveyed the other spectators. Leaves on the trees at the top of the harbour fluttered briskly.

His attention returned to Blackhead across the Lough and then to the speedboat with its little passenger, bouncing up and down as the stern of the boat hit each wave crest. The child was clinging firmly on to the seat back, as the driver confidently sped along, somewhat faster now. His youthful attention alternated for some time between his fellows on the sea wall and the speed boat.

Suddenly, he became involuntarily riveted to the spot, as he saw the driver audaciously start to execute a sharp turn. The boat rose and tipped into the turn, as they do. He saw the stem of the boat bite into a wave crest like a shark diving, spraying a mass of foam into the breeze, soaking the sailors. Instantly, the whole craft flipped over, out of control. Its propeller was screaming - spinning furiously in the air. The boat came to an abrupt stop.

There was a collective gasp of horror from the watching seawall. Then complete silence; except for the rhythmic crashing of waves onto the rocks below. Everyone was passively viewing the tragedy unfold, as if in slow motion. Groomsport seemed to go helplessly quiet for a while, everyone watching hopefully for various rescue attempts to succeed. People on the wall whispered to one another reverently. Eventually they slowly dispersed.

Tragedy! He was experiencing an event so traumatic that the sadness of it was seared into his memory for the rest of his life...

He looked again in the mirror, handbrake firmly on, briefly seeing a man sadly carry his lifeless little son laboriously from the beached boat. He released the handbrake and moved off slowly.

He trudges through the front door, slings his briefcase at the side of the hall table and slumps himself down on the sofa opposite the living room window. He closed his weary eyes. He would retire soon, he thought. His window affords a picturesque view over Groomsport harbour and the North Channel but he is oblivious of it today.

It had been a typical winter's day, a hard day even. Some of the pupils in his class, reflecting the season perhaps, had been particularly truculent. He is mentally worn out; spiritually worn down. He dozed fitfully for a half hour before sitting up and gazing at the horizon above Blackhead.

There it was – a flash of white, maybe silver, so brief there is no time to check the colour. It gets his attention though, as, focusing mind and eyes, he emerges from his doze. There is another one. It streaks comet like across the sky. It plunges into the waves like a spear, maybe a mile offshore. The breeze is whipping foam off the wave crests, creating a temporary low-level mist. Further out to sea, a coaster is ploughing slowly through the chop towards the Copelands. Its prow is encased in spray as it digs laboriously into each wave.

Intrigued, he pulls his field glasses from beside the sofa. He carefully removes the lens covers and focuses out to sea. There they are - Terns or Gannets, diving bravely and skilfully into the foam. They emerge confidently above the crests a minute or so later, with sustenance, perhaps for their fledglings on Cockle Island. As they plunge streamlined into the foam at a shallow angle, they seem to rotate slightly, entering the water sideways or almost upside down. He is vaguely reminded of something. He can't crystallise his thoughts and the moment passes.

He studied the fruitful activities of the birds for a while and it seemed as if the graceful productivity framed by his window inspired, soothed and restored his wounded spirit.

He was refreshed as he watched these expert divers playing in the waves.